



Carver Mansion Late 1800s



Carver Mansion Today

Fort Graham Chapter Application for Historic Designation Approved

The Texas Historic Commission recently granted the application made by the Fort Graham Chapter Texas Daughters of the American Revolution for a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RHTL) designation for the Carver Mansion in Whitney. This is the first building in Whitney to receive this honor. To raise funds for the installation of the marker and similar historical preservation projects, DAR members are planning *Hats for History—Mad Hatter's Gala*.

The history of the Carver Mansion mirrors that of Hill County. One hundred sixty-five years ago, on December 29, 1845, President James Polk signed legislation making Texas the 28th state of the United States of America. That same month, Eliphas Spencer built the log cabin that today is the dining room of the Carver Mansion. From frontier land promoted by impresarios of the Mexican government, through revolution, independence, statehood, wars, industrialization spurred by railroads, boom and bust -- the Carver Mansion and its owners were witnesses to the transformation of Whitney from unprotected frontier to farmlands to a typical small Texas town.

The Spencer family was not the first to own the land that is home to the Carver Mansion. The earliest non-native settlers had arrived during the 18th century when Spain established a series of missions along with the cities of Goliad, Nacogdoches, and San Antonio. After Spain came Mexico. On January 3, 1823, Stephen F. Austin received a grant from the Mexican government and began the process of colonizing areas along the Brazos River. Impresarios such as Austin and Sterling Clack Robertson selected colonists and allocated land to heads of families who, in exchange for a small fee, could obtain as much as a league (4428.4 acres) of grazing land and a labor (177.1 acres) of cropland. The new immigrants had to obey the federal and state constitutions of Mexico, practice Christianity, and prove their morality and good habits.

In 1830, before Texas became a state and before the Mexican-American War, came the widow Mary Beacham, who filed an application in 1838 for a Head Right Land Grant. Her arrival in Texas coincided with the period in which Sterling C. Robertson brought over 600 families into the area, many at his own expense. As she staked her claim, Mary Beacham became the first in a line of strong women who would love this land, the site of the home now known as the Carver Mansion.

After Mary Beacham's death, the Probate Court of Galveston County ordered her land sold at public auction "to pay the debts of said estate." The land passed through three owners before being purchased by Eliphas Spencer in 1845. Spencer built their two-room log cabin and transferred title of the land to his wife Catherine by executing a Deed of Gift which stated, "This deed recites to have been executed in compliance with the marriage contract between grantor and grantee, dated May 29, 1847." There they lived and reared their only child, Emmeline Mariah Albright Spencer, named for Catherine's sister. Eliphas Spencer died in 1860.

Early settlers of Texas were never free from danger. During the Mexican-American War, Indian raids in Texas increased alarmingly. Thus in the late 1840's, the U S government established a series of federal forts to provide protection to frontier settlers. In what would become Hill County, Fort Graham was established by the United States Army on March 27, 1849, and was located on the east bank of the Brazos River at the mouth of Bear Creek, about 14 miles west of Hillsboro, about six miles from the Spencers' home. Fort Graham afforded them some degree of physical protection from marauding Indians until it was abandoned in 1854.

There was no protection, though, against the economic, health, and communications problems that plagued the nation as a whole during the Civil War. Letters from Catherine's sister and brother in Philadelphia speak of illness, death, physical pain, and the worry associated with being unable to communicate, even by letter. After the war, commodities and housing were scarce and expensive. Catherine Albright Spencer complains that eggs cost fifty cents per dozen and a pound of butter was seventy-five cents – exorbitant prices in 1866! The Spencers were people of their time and location – for better and worse – and The United States Census for Hill County Texas in 1860 reports that Eliphas Spencer owned one slave.

In 1860, a horse trader named Colmon M. Carver stopped at the Spencer home and asked for a drink of water. Carver fell in love with the young Emmeline Spencer and promised to marry her after the Civil War ended. He obtained a contract with the Confederate government to haul salt, coffee, and flour and soon had two wagon trains drawn by oxen. The business was quite profitable until Confederate money began to depreciate, but the shrewd businessman managed to find ways to prosper, even in the difficult times. On July 22, 1868, Colmon Carver married Miss Emmeline M. A. Spencer. The widowed Catherine Spencer lived with her daughter and son-in-law until her death in 1882.

In 1875, the original log cabin was enclosed within a larger home, incorporating the cabin as the kitchen at the back of the house. The single-story home was a typical foursquare plan common to the period. The painted clapboard exterior was embellished with Victorian details on the porch columns and pediment, as well as the roof eaves and rake.

In 1879, Texas Central Railroad arrived to build the town of Whitney on land purchased from Mr. I. E. Griffith, who had been cultivating the land adjacent to the Mary Beacham league. The town was named for railroad stockholder Charles A. Whitney of New York, the brother-in-law of J. P. Morgan. The day town lots were sold to the public was widely advertised and promoted with a grand picnic and barbeque. People came from near and far to participate in the event held in the cornfields with only four houses in sight - one being C. M. Carver's home to the east. The sale was very successful and by the end of the day the railroad had added \$32,000 to its coffers.

Locals referred to the Carvers as the “Rockefellers of Whitney and Central Texas.” Mr. Carver owned thousands of acres all across Texas and had a reputation for being “somewhat of a miser and a tightwad” who, if a transaction yielded an odd penny, would draw a line on the ground and have a spitting contest for it. The one spitting closest to the line would get the odd penny and it was reported that Mr. Carver never lost.

Colmon Carver died in his home on April 10, 1911, and was buried in Bethlehem Cemetery in Whitney. Approximately one year after his death it was reported that fire was coming from his grave and the flames could be seen for miles. People arrived on horseback, buggies and wagons to see the strange phenomenon, but fear kept them from getting close. Some theorized that the flames of hell were bubbling up through Mr. Carver’s grave because of his reputation for being tight, for the way he figured interest and for charging for water—an unpardonable sin in those days. It wasn’t until 1925 that citizens learned that two prominent Whitney men who had studied at Texas A&M had orchestrated the practical joke, installing a machine to project light rays that gave the impression of flames emulating from Mr. Carver’s grave.

In 1912, Emmeline Carver and her son Charles paid over \$5,000 to E. Bruyere of Waco to add a second story to the house, replacing the Victorian façade with a full-width porch, built in the Greek Revival style. The larger house continues the wood siding as the exterior surface. Inside the home, dark-stained interior millwork includes an ornate central staircase with heavy wood balusters and rail, pocket doors, beamed ceilings, and ornate door and window moldings. Some of the original plumbing fixtures are still in service, including a six-foot long clawfoot cast iron tub that was specially built for the very tall Colmon Carver.

Outbuildings at the mansion include a henhouse, an outhouse, a carriage house, and a smokehouse/food pantry constructed from native limestone. There is also a simple, one-room, wood structure which was used as slave quarters during the time of Eliphas Spencer. All outbuildings (except the smokehouse) reflect the simple, clapboard-faced frame structure of the main house.

Emmeline Carver died on October 7, 1936, and was buried in Bethlehem Cemetery in Whitney, near her husband and parents. The cemetery land had been donated to the city by Catherine Spencer.

In 1968, the Carver Mansion was purchased by Whitney natives Fred and Jennye Mae Basham, who rescued the home from the rental market and began restoring it. Fred Basham was Whitney’s mayor during the infamous 1949 *Battle of the Benches* that caught national attention and a spread in Life magazine. The townswomen decided they had had enough of the gaggle of men who gathered daily on a downtown bench to cuss, discuss, whittle, chew, and spit. “Why, they must spit two or three gallons a day! They ain’t died fast enough, these old men!” cried Mrs. T. E. Bagley. Mysteriously, the bench disappeared one night, only to be replaced with nail barrels upon which the cantankerous men resolutely perched. The uproar led to a special election whether to restore the bench, and the pro-bench faction won convincingly 124 – 67. The bench was restored.

Fred Basham spent 28 years in the military and Jennye Mae was a civil service worker, thus they had traveled the world before returning to Whitney. When lack of funding threatened to stop construction of the Whitney Dam, Fred Basham traveled to Washington and lobbied Speaker Sam Rayburn, enabling continued funding for the dam, which was completed in 1954.

Preservation of history was important to the Bashams and they spent many hours researching and preserving historical data, much of which is housed in the Whitney Area Museum. In 1971, a tornado destroyed the Carver Mansion's tall chimneys and 18 windows. The Bashams repaired the house and then added a small portion onto the back of the house. The mansion, currently owned by Sherrian Bryant, was then lovingly and faithfully restored by Sherrian and her husband Larry, who died in 2010.

The Carver Mansion has been repeatedly owned by strong, independent women who persevered through difficult times. It is undoubtedly the most prominent and grandest residence in Whitney, retaining the exact exterior appearance crafted in 1912 – an excellent example of the Greek Revival style.

Undoubtedly, the Carver Mansion and its owners have played a significant and continuing role in the history and development of Hill County. The Fort Graham Chapter, DAR, is proud to play a role in preserving the history of this grand home and looks forward to a fun-filled Hats for History .